

GEOGRAPHIC ASPECTS OF THE ADRIATIC PROBLEM.

By DOUGLAS JOHNSON.

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No question before the Peace Conference presented greater difficulties than that of Italy's eastern frontier. The Adriatic problem is essentially a geographic problem. It subdivides itself into a question of naval geography and a question of land frontiers.

The mountainous, ragged eastern coast of the Adriatic with its numerous harbors, is in strong contrast with the low, simple western coast where harbors are few in number and inferior in quality. Any naval power on the eastern coast must find itself possessing immense advantages over Italy. A fleet taking refuge in one of the Italian harbors is visible from far out to sea because of the flatness of the coast, whereas vessels secreted along the eastern shore are invisible behind mountain barriers. From the low western coast observation of an approaching squadron is limited as compared with the better observation enjoyed by those on the dominating heights of the eastern shores. Coast defense artillery has little choice of inferior positions on the Italian side, and unlimited choice of excellent positions on the eastern coast. A fleet emerging from one of the western harbors to give battle may be taken unawares before it can develop its battle formation; while a fleet manœvering behind the protective fringe of islands along the east coast may emerge from a number of passages simultaneously and assume a predetermined formation without delay. The Italian submarines, scouting along the eastern shores, find the bottom rough and deep, so that lying in wait for an enemy is a dangerous procedure; while the Austrian submarine finds shallow water and a smooth bottom upon which to lie concealed, pending the passage of an intended victim. The clear waters along the eastern coast reveal hidden mines or submarines to the scouting hydroplane, while the murkier

waters bordering the Italian coast make it difficult for Italian observers to locate enemy submarines or mines sown by enemy craft. Even in the matter of illumination the Italians are at a great disadvantage. Raids are usually made by crossing the sea under the cover of darkness and appearing off the enemy coast in the early morning. When an Austrian raider thus appears off the Italian coast, his objective is well illuminated by the rising sun; whereas the Italian artillerymen must look into the sun when firing upon their attacker. And when an Italian squadron appears off the eastern coast, it finds its objective obscured by the shadow of high cliffs and must look toward the sun when developing its fire, the while its own vessels are so well illuminated as to form excellent targets for the east coast batteries.

On such arguments as these Italy might claim the need of special consideration in the Adriatic. Without taking time to develop the counter arguments I will merely note that in the proposals which have been made for the settlement of the Adriatic question, complete security has been offered to Italy by granting her Pola, Valona and a central island group, three points which have long been recognized as the strategic keys of the Adriatic.

On ethnographic grounds Italy could claim but little east of her old land frontier. She might ask for Gorizia, Trieste and a narrow strip along the west coast of Istria; but beyond this both Italian and Yugoslav geographers agree that Italians are few in number and scattered throughout an overwhelming mass of Yugoslavs. On topographic grounds, and to preserve the geographic and economic unity of the Isonzo basin, as well as to afford Italy reasonable protection on the east, her frontier in this region might be pushed up the slopes of the Julian Alps to the crest dividing the westward from the eastward flowing rivers, and in Istria to the main backbone ridge of Monte Maggiore. This would subject 370,000 Yugoslavs to Italian rule, and leave less than 50,000 Italians in Jugoslavia.

But Italy demanded much more than this. East of this line she asked for the Idria district with its valuable mercury mines, and its 20,500 Yugoslavs with practically no Italians; for a large district cutting the Fiume-Laibach railway and containing 40,000 Yugoslavs

with less than a hundred Italians; and for all of Istria, and the shores of the Gulf of Fiume to and including the port, as well as islands which would close the gulf and make it an Italian lake. In the long negotiations looking toward a reduction of these claims, Italy's persistent demand for explicit or virtual control of the port of Fiume proved the most serious stumbling block.

The peculiar strategic value of Fiume from both the economic and military point of view is at once apparent. A glance at the map will show that the Dinaric Alps, a broad belt of wild and rugged mountainous country, intervenes between the interior of the Balkan peninsula and the Adriatic Sea. South of Fiume this range is crossed by but two or three narrow-gauge railroads, wholly inadequate to serve the commercial needs of the interior. The only standard gauge road crosses the mountain barrier at its narrowest point, opposite Fiume. The geographic conditions are such as permanently to preclude any cheap and effective rail transport across the broad part of the barrier; hence Fiume, advantageously situated opposite the narrowest part, and at the head of a sea that makes water transportation both cheap and easy, is the inevitable economic outlet for the northern part of Yugoslavia. Practically the whole standard gauge railroad system of Yugoslavia is in the latitude of Fiume, because the fertile river plains of the country are almost entirely confined to that region; because nearly two-thirds of the population lives in these plains and valleys; because railroad construction is easy and comparatively inexpensive there; and because there is sufficient local traffic to maintain the roads and keep rates down. Thus it will be seen that the life of the Yugoslav nation is to an unusual degree concentrated in the north of the country; and as the railroad system upon which this economic life depends has its only direct outlet to the sea at Fiume, it may well be said that the power that holds Fiume holds the life of an entire nation in its hands.

Not only do Austria and Hungary, and to a considerable degree Czechoslovakia and the newly enlarged Rumania look to Fiume as an important economic outlet, but all the outside world desiring to trade with central and southeastern Europe via the Mediterranean

route has a very real interest in the settlement of this question. According to the settlement offered Italy, Trieste would go to Italy and Fiume to Jugoslavia. The Italian port could then supply the hinterland by a line of rail which would not have to cross Jugoslav territory; while Fiume could supply the same hinterland by a line not touching Italian possessions. This would insure freedom of commerce to all, both ports and routes being secure from possible interference by a jealous neighbor. All the world would profit from such an equitable arrangement, assuring equality of opportunity to all.

Italy's economic interest in Fiume is necessarily slight. Even if one granted her demand that more than half a million Jugoslavs be placed under her dominion in order to extend her frontier to include the few thousand Italians in Fiume, the port would remain at the most remote corner of her territory. It is hardly conceivable that Italian commerce would pass by the much more convenient Trieste in order to reach a more distant and less serviceable port.

There was no natural harbor at Fiume. The artificial harbor was constructed by the Hungarian government at great expense. Before the war it was found to be inadequate, and plans were formulated for its enlargement and improvement. These plans will entail a very large expenditure of government funds, and it is difficult to believe that Italy will ever be prepared to expend her millions for the development of an artificial peripheral port to compete with the more accessible port of Trieste. Especially is this true when we remember that Italy considered it essential that her eastern frontier should be pushed 12 or 15 miles east of Trieste for the protection of its port works. At Fiume the frontier proposed by Italy would pass through one of the basins of the port, so that a hostile advance of a few thousand yards would deliver the entire port into enemy hands. If Italy could not afford to develop Trieste without adequate territorial protection, she could hardly afford to develop the much more remote Fiume without any protection. And the supreme interest of the people of Fiume, Italians as well as Jugoslavs, is to have their port become one of the great commercial gateways of Europe.

A study of the geographic aspects of the Adriatic problem leaves no escape from the conclusion that the interests of Jugoslavia, of Central Europe, of the outside world, and of the people of Fiume itself, demand that Fiume should be assigned to Jugoslavia when Trieste is assigned to Italy.

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